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Run-on sentences and sentence fragments: is the instruction treating the problem?

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by

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INTRODUCTION

College freshmen, unaware of grammatical rules, write run-on sentences and sentence fragments in their compositions. Instructors justifiably mark those structures in students' compositions as serious errors. By way of remediation, the instructors assign sections in grammar handbooks that tell students both how to avoid and how to correct those errors. But some students continue to write run-on sentences and sentence fragments. What, then, are effective ways to deal with those sentence structure errors in freshman compositions?

Handbook approaches may or may not be effective, but run-ons and fragments need to be dealt with in some way because they are errors; they violate the verbal contract that exists between the writer and the reader.[1] That is, a reader does not expect a comma at the end of a sentence or a period at the end of a dependent clause. Both run-ons and fragments appear with frequency in students' compositions. John Higgins analyzed college freshmen's placement themes and found that "run-together sentences" with or without commas occurred in 50% of all papers, appearing more than once in 27% of them; fragments occurred in 45% of all papers, recurring in 20%.[2] Furthermore, both appeared more often in papers from what he identified as the lower remedial group.[3] Run-ons and fragments are common errors in compositions, but what

is the nature of these grammatical blunders? Why do they occur? What knowledge or skills are students lacking? Instructors must answer these questions if they are to help their students write correct compound and complex sentences.

In compositions, the appearance of those two types of sentences indicates a certain level of syntactic maturity. Studies completed by Kellogg Hunt and Frank O'Hare, for instance, show that as students mature, their ability to "consolidate a successively larger number of single sentences into a single T-unit" grows, so students reach successively higher levels of syntactic maturity.[4] Hunt defines a T-unit as "a single main clause (or independent clause . . .) plus whatever other subordinate clauses or nonclauses are attached to, or embedded within, that one main clause."[5] He reported that "T-unit coordination blooms early"--by fourth grade--and that subordination appears by grade eight.[6] At that time, students begin to use the appositive, and by college age, he found them producing -ing structures ("The chicken cackled, waking the man").[7]

In another study comparing students' and adults' writing, Francis Christensen also found that a high incidence of subordination characterizes a mature style.[8] However, Christensen focused on what he called "final free modifiers" or subordinate structures "set off by junctures or punctuation" that

are "loose or additive or nonessential or nonrestrictive."[9] He defines final free modifiers as "prepositional phrases; relative and subordinate clauses; noun, verb, adjective, and adverbial phrases or clusters; and . . . verbid clauses or absolutes."[10] Christensen found that not only would a mature style "have a relatively high frequency of free modifiers," but those free modifiers would also occur most often in sentence final position.[11]

These studies show that coordination appears in the writing of students of a fairly young age. College students, therefore, should not produce run-on sentences but should be able to write compound sentences correctly. However, college students with deficient writing abilities may not have mastered the principle of coordination yet; those students may require remedial instruction. Regardless, run-on sentences at the college level would be considered as serious errors since coordination is a skill college students should have acquired. On the other hand, students at this level are still learning to create and subordinate dependent grammatical structures, and because some of these structures are unfamiliar, students punctuate them as sentences. Thus fragments are errors but also evidence that students are attempting to write more complicated sentences. However instructors view run-ons and fragments, though, students evidently need to

review the principles of coordination and subordination.

In this study, the terms coordination and subordination will refer to the joining of clauses and phrases to form complete sentences. Specifically, the principles of coordination will refer to connecting two independent clauses to create a compound sentence; the principles of subordination will signify linking a dependent phrase or clause to an independent clause. Students by college age presumably have mastered coordination and have acquired some facility with subordination. The existence of run-ons and fragments may suggest an absence of grammatical knowledge of what constitutes independent and dependent structures. Without that knowledge, students are often unable to punctuate their sentences correctly. Their use of periods and semicolons may create fragments, and their use of commas may produce run-on sentences. Mina Shaughnessy maintains that ignorance of sentence structures and punctuation rules will produce run-on sentences and fragments; to her, those errors indicate that students mark off sentences according to the "rhetorical units" they perceive, which results in word groups "longer or shorter than the grammatical sentence."[12] Not knowing the grammatical make-up of complete sentences, students are bound to use the wrong punctuation and consequently will produce run-ons and fragments, even though their sense of juncture may be correct.[13]

Apparently, to avoid writing run-ons and fragments, students need to know the elements of a complete sentence, the principles of coordination and subordination, and the pertinent punctuation rules. Students must have "an analytical grasp of the sentence" in order to punctuate correctly the rhetorical units their intuitions identify.[14] Since most composition instructors depend on grammar handbooks to teach correctness, how accurately and efficiently do those texts deal with run-ons and fragments? Furthermore, does the treatment of those sentence structure errors reflect the research on them? Most importantly, do the handbooks and the research deal with the types of run-on sentences and sentence fragments students actually write?

The following chapters will examine what the research says about run-ons and fragments, what students' errors reveal about the problems and solutions, and what handbooks present as explanation and remediation. Specifically, chapter one will review the research on run-ons and fragments and outline the remedial approaches suggested for each error. Chapter two will present an analysis and discussion of run-ons and fragments from fourteen narrative essays written by students in a college freshman composition class. Next, chapter three will analyze handbooks' treatment of run-ons and fragments. Finally, chapter four will summarize and draw conclusions

about the effectiveness of most textbooks' instruction and will then suggest a different perspective on run-on sentences and sentence fragments and perhaps a more accurate approach to remediation.

CHAPTER I. REVIEW OF THE RESEARCH

Run-on Sentences

In general, the research defines a run-on sentence as one of two types: (1) a run-together sentence, or two independent clauses joined without punctuation, and (2) a comma splice, or two independent clauses linked by only a comma. Comma splices receive most of the attention in the research, although both types of run-ons indicate that students do not recognize grammatically independent clauses and do not use punctuation marks correctly. According to Shaughnessy, lacking those abilities and thinking in rhetorical units larger than sentences, students hesitate to use a period when their thoughts go on; they use a comma instead.[16] Their commas connect sentences that make rhetorical sense together: "'In her late teens my mother looked for enjoyment, I'm the end result.'"[17] Do run-ons indicate a stage in some students' development of the ability to coordinate independent clauses correctly?

According to a study completed by Philip DiStefano and Robert Marzano, run-on sentences may occur when students first attempt more complicated structures and so may be indicators of growing syntactic maturity. DiStefano and Marzano analyzed compositions of varying quality written by students grouped by ages nine, thirteen, and seventeen. They sought to identify

factors in compositions that would be "good predictors of quality at different grade levels."[18] The ability to coordinate begins in grade school, but run-on sentences were named "positive predictors of quality at all grade levels."[19] Unfortunately, DiStefano and Marzano fail to explain why run-ons are "positive predictors." However, as they discuss the factors predictive of quality, they state that "there is definitely a logical progression in the way age and quality of writing are connected to base clause expansion."[20] Logically, then, as students try to write more complicated sentences--adding independent clauses to expand a base clause, for example--they would initially produce more errors. Run-on sentences could therefore predict a developing capability of writing correct compound sentences. As syntactic maturity grows and students learn to coordinate two independent clauses correctly, the incidence of run-on sentences should decrease.

Understanding that run-ons may be indicative of syntactic growth, instructors may recognize that the college students who produce them need supplementary lessons to review coordination. Those remedial lessons would be additionally helpful if instructors could focus upon the grammatical contexts in which run-ons commonly occur. Do the independent clauses college students run together fall into common grammatical patterns? In a study done to answer that question, Dona Kagan

notes two common patterns in run-on sentences: a short sentence followed by a longer one, and a strong verbal element, such as a compound verb or participial phrase, in the longer sentence.[21] Kagan asked remedial college students to identify the run-ons and complete sentences on a prepared test that listed, without punctuation, eleven run-ons and four complete sentences. Kagan observed three main patterns in the students' selections of items as run-ons: short sentence + long sentence with a subordinate clause; short sentence + long sentence with a compound verb; long sentence with a participial phrase + short sentence.[22] This unit from her test illustrates the pattern of a short simple sentence followed by a long sentence with a participial phrase: "The door slammed the woman clenched her fists digging her nails into her palms."[23] (Other examples of Kagan's patterns are in Table 1 on page 30.) Kagan reasoned that students define "'complete sentence'" as a unit which exceeds "a certain minimal length" and contains a verb-noun sequence.[24] The students' choices seem to indicate ignorance of grammatically complete sentence structures; however, Kagan's results reflect an artificial situation. Student-written run-ons may not follow the structural patterns Kagan's study described. Her study does reveal that students lack grammatical knowledge about sentence structure, but what other information do they need that would enable them to avoid writing run-on sentences?

Students may continue to write run-on sentences if the principles of punctuating two independent clauses do not become clear. Therefore, since students commonly link related sentences using only commas, they evidently need to know the correct means for connecting sentences.[25] The implication is that students misunderstand or are unaware of the accepted uses of commas and are ignorant of how to use semicolons. Then a run-on sentence may be merely a punctuation error, for students are joining rhetorically related sentences at the correct juncture, adhering to that principle of coordination. What students need to learn is the acceptable use of punctuation marks for coordinating two independent clauses. William Irmscher explains that if students recognize a period as a "terminal mark" and a comma as an "interrupting mark," then the other punctuation marks can be learned as "sophisticated variations of those two," for he contends that all the marks perform the same functions but to varying degrees.[26]

From this perspective, Irmscher recommends building a system for the usage of punctuation marks, since a run-on sentence is not "a failure to write complete sentences but a failure to punctuate them correctly."[27] In Irmscher's system, punctuation marks can be explained and related by their functions. A period terminates or has "a stopping and separating function;" a comma interrupts or performs a dual separating-

combining function--"a break, but going on."[28] A comma by itself is therefore inadequate to separate two sentences; it must be used with a coordinating conjunction to perform that role. However, a semicolon, while operating as a comma to link, is also strong enough to separate two sentences by itself or with a conjunctive adverb. After building such a system of punctuation marks with the comma as the base, each mark can be comparatively explained, and Irmscher concludes that "all the rest is illustration, practice, and application."[29]

Since run-on sentences are incorrectly punctuated, then explaining the correct usage of punctuation marks should help students produce grammatically correct compound sentences. As they practice writing these constructions correctly, according to Irmscher they will gradually learn that the means of coordination used is also a rhetorical choice.[30] However, the research emphatically points out that while running sentences together without punctuation or connectives is always incorrect, comma splices are often rhetorically effective and acceptable. Several conditions must be met, though: the clauses spliced together must be short, of parallel grammatical structure, and closely related or logically connected in meaning.[31] In fact, a comma splice may actually be preferable when it creates no "syntactic ambiguity" and lends "greater fluency of

expression" to the passage.[32] For example, in "He filled the beaker with liquid, he heated it on a butane burner (,) and he took readings at equal intervals of time," the independent clauses are short, simple sentences, each beginning with the personal pronoun he as the subject; since the clauses state steps in a process, they are logically related.[33]

While instructors usually prohibit the use of such comma splices in expository writing, most of the research counters that comma splices often appear in the works of professional writers where they are not considered errors.[34] Instead, in narrative/descriptive writing, a comma splice is often "a good and appropriate, sometimes necessary, use of the comma."[35] However, before students are taught the conditions that will allow comma splices, they need to learn how to coordinate two independent clauses correctly. If students write run-ons, they are linking semantically related sentences, which indicates a rhetorical consideration. Therefore, what these students apparently do not know is how to punctuate a compound sentence correctly. They must learn, first, to recognize when independent clauses are joined inadequately, and, second, to judge what punctuation mark will correctly link the clauses under what conditions, such as a comma being adequate only when a coordinating conjunction follows it. After they master the correct alternatives, then the acceptable uses of comma splices can be discussed.

Summary

Comma splices receive the most attention in the research, although both types of run-on sentences are errors because a reader expects to stop at the end of a sentence. The lack of punctuation between two independent clauses or the use of a comma between them causes confusion. The research explains that run-ons are caused by a failure to recognize two independent clauses and by misunderstanding the rules of punctuation. Because coordination is an early-developing skill, most college students should link two rhetorically related independent clauses intuitively. Since only one study specifies the grammatical construction of the two clauses run together, few conclusions can be made regarding the grammatical composition of run-on sentences. When errors occur at the college level, instruction in punctuation may adequately alleviate the problem of run-ons. Lessons that review the structure of independent clauses and the principles of coordination and teach the uses of punctuation marks should reduce the number of run-ons in college students' compositions. Although the research claims that under some conditions comma splices are acceptable, college instructors usually do not accept them in expository writing.

Sentence Fragments

Sentence fragments are another common type of sentence structure error college students make in their compositions. Fragments, like run-ons, generally occur because students use the wrong punctuation mark; using a period instead of a comma, students inadvertently cut off part of a sentence and create a fragment. In other words, a fragment occurs when students "break a single grammatical sentence into two punctuated sentences incorrectly," as in "'My mother had four children. Only because she had no choice.'"[36] Shaughnessy explains that students punctuate by rhetorical, not grammatical, units, as in the preceding example; that is, students' sense of completeness is not a grammatical sense, so they mark off as sentences units that may present a complete idea but are dependent grammatical structures.[37] Frequently, fragments are grammatically dependent sentence final structures that have a sense of rhetorical independence, as in "'We would live off the earth, and nature. Living together to survive.'"[38] Here the student uses a period instead of the comma necessary to attach the sentence final participial phrase to the base clause.

Students punctuate a number of dependent grammatical structures as sentences. According to Shaughnessy, sentence initial adverbial clauses may become fragments because

students, by the time they reach their main thought, forget the "initial word that suspends the clause," as in "'But I think if people could learn to think a little like children. This would be a better place to live.'"[39] Shaughnessy also claims that the second part of a compound structure often becomes a fragment; in this example, the second verb of a compound verb in a noun clause is punctuated as a sentence: "'I agree that the little boy has seen beauty. But is confused with the question.'"[40] Sarah D'Eloia names several other structures that commonly become fragments in students' writing: "long introductory phrases, subjects divided from verbs, verbs separated from subjects, and adverb clauses."[41] (Examples of these fragments are in Table 2 on page 35.) D'Eloia supports Shaughnessy's stance that fragments occur because students punctuate according to rhetorical units, not grammatically complete units. That is, to D'Eloia, fragments are "errors of punctuation rather than grammar," yet they arise because students, reading their sentences, have no other means to tell how to punctuate them than by using the length of the units or the pauses between them.[42] She explains that fragments occur "because the student is unable to establish sentence boundaries by distinguishing independent clauses from all the other structures which can attach to them."[43]

Kagan names other dependent structures as being common

sentence fragments. As she did for run-ons, Kagan prepared a test on fragments which she administered to the same remedial students; they were to indicate which items were complete sentences and which were fragments. This test listed "fifteen different combinations of syntactic structures" that were fragments and five that were complete sentences.[44] As she did for run-ons, she again found patterns in the students' selections of fragments as complete sentences: verb + subordinate clause, verb + direct object + prepositional phrase, two prepositional phrases.[45] (Fragments from Kagan's test that illustrate these patterns are in Table 2 on page 35.) Kagan therefore concluded that a verb at the head of a structure is apparently a "common miscue" that students use when identifying sentences, as in "Shouted loudly because he knew she was deaf."[46] Kagan also speculated that some inherent quality in prepositional phrases--perhaps their length or function as a complete grammatical unit--causes students to identify them as complete sentences.[47] Unfortunately, these patterns which Kagan identified as common types of sentence fragments are drawn from an artificial situation, not from actual students' writing, and they may not be valid.

The results of Muriel Harris' study are more reliable, as she analyzed student-written fragments. In order to prepare instructional materials for a writing lab, she examined one

hundred fragments from essays students brought to the lab from their composition classes. She found that free modifiers occurring after the base clause predicate often become fragments. Specifically, she, as Christensen, identified these fragmented final free modifiers as "nonessential prepositional phrases; relative and subordinate clauses; nominative absolutes; and noun, verb, adjectival, and adverbial phrases."[48] (Examples of these structures as fragments are in Table 2 on page 35.) Of the student fragments analyzed, 83% were these "modifying phrases and clauses which should have been included after the base clause" but which were separated from it instead by a period.[49] These final free modifiers, as in "Her arms were long and small, but there was strength in them. Hands rough and calloused from long hard hours of work." are "late blooming structures."[50] Harris concurs with Christensen's findings that final free modifiers are evidence of a developing mature style, because they are found in the works of mature writers.[51] Therefore, as college-age students learn to handle these structures, they often punctuate them incorrectly as sentences, not yet fully understanding the principles and methods of subordination nor the use of the comma for joining.

Harris, like Christensen, claims that final free modifiers are signs of increasing syntactic maturity. Therefore,

when struggling to produce longer, more complex sentences by adding words and clauses per T-unit, students will likely produce fragments in the process. At first, students may punctuate final free modifiers as sentences until they learn how to control these structures by joining them to the base clauses with which they belong. Developing this skill to subordinate begins early in grade school, according to Constance Weaver. After studying fragments students wrote in grades one through six, Weaver reported that students produce a fairly stable proportion of fragments per grade level; however, the types of fragments change from level to level as students begin using more mature grammatical structures.[52] For instance, at first grade she found that students will punctuate explanatory "because" clauses as sentences, and then in second grade they will cut off the second part of a compound structure; by sixth grade they write the different types of subordinate clauses as sentences.[53] So as students start learning about and producing new grammatically dependent structures, initially they may write them as sentences, creating fragments. As they continue to write from grade to grade, learning more about sentence structures and punctuation, ideally they will master the use of dependent clauses and phrases and not write them as fragments.

When students at all grade levels begin transforming

complete ideas into dependent grammatical structures, they may at first punctuate the structures as sentences.[54] As Shaughnessy suggests, students may fail to attach the structures because subordinating them at the ends of sentences requires students to remember their base sentences.[55] Apparently, these students have not yet developed the semantic and syntactic abilities to do that. However, not all sentence fragments are considered errors. Two studies--one by Harris, one by Charles Kline and W. Dean Memering--categorize sentence fragments as "broken sentences" and "minor sentences."[56] They define a broken sentence as a "fragmented, discontinuous, and/or noncontinuous thought," and both studies concur that it is an error and should be avoided.[57] Harris gives as an example of a broken sentence, "'In a little night club in Louisville, a couple of my friends, Rick and Lon, the duo who were providing the entertainment that night for the club. Rick plays an organ with three synthesizers included.'"[58] She explains the first unit as a broken sentence because attaching it to the second unit will not complete it, so this type of fragment is an error.[59]

On the other hand, Harris, Kline and Memering contend that minor sentences "express a complete idea or complete a previously stated idea minus one or more of the items typically present in an English sentence," so a minor sentence

needs to be obviously related to an adjacent "written unit."[60] Kline and Memering explain that minor sentences could be questions, answers to questions, or could occur in dialogue, but they must be written deliberately for specific rhetorical and stylistic purposes and not occur unintentionally.[61] Harris suggests that minor sentences occur more frequently and are not errors, yet this example she provides, although it meets the prescribed conditions, does not seem to be an intentional fragment: "'She had a very funny look on her face. As if she was scared and just wanted to be left alone.'"[62] Here the fragment or minor sentence can be joined logically to the base clause. A better example of a minor sentence might be "The blue car." in answer to the question, "Which car is yours?" in a dialogue.

However, students do not necessarily need to know that these types of situations allow sentence fragments until after students can recognize and correct fragments in their own compositions. Besides, as Kline and Memering point out, sentence fragments are usually not permitted in the types of formal, expository writing done in college composition courses.[63] If students do write compositions that contain dialogue or question-answer situations, then teachers may give examples of fragments allowed in those contexts. Otherwise, for whatever mode of discourse, students should first gain

control of complete sentence structures, learning to embed and attach clauses and phrases correctly. After showing that they can consistently produce complete sentences, students could learn to examine the style and purpose of their discourse to ascertain where a sentence fragment might be more effective than a complete sentence.

Summary

A sentence fragment is an error that occurs when students punctuate as sentences rhetorical units that are actually dependent grammatical structures. The research cites a number of those dependent structures as common sentence fragments, and most often they are final free modifiers. At the college level, fragments are frequently subordinate clauses. As indicators of syntactic maturity, fragments occur as students learn to subordinate increasingly more complicated grammatical structures. Then from grade to grade, as the research suggests, students fragment different structures as they struggle to subordinate each successfully. To facilitate the process, instructors should present the principles of subordination and teach the difference between independent and dependent sentence structures. Although the research amply covers the rhetorically acceptable uses of sentence fragments, these situations would normally not occur in the types of expository writing students do in college. Besides, before students

should be allowed to experiment with acceptable uses of fragments, they should indicate that they know the requirements of grammatical completeness by writing complete sentences and correcting any fragments they find in their compositions.

Remediation of Run-ons and Fragments

Since run-ons and fragments are common errors that occur with some frequency in students' compositions, how can teachers best deal with them in the classroom? What, according to the research, needs to be taught? As suggested, run-ons and fragments occur because students punctuate sentences according to the length of the structures, the pauses they hear, or a sense that the structures are related somehow; students fail to distinguish independent clauses from each other and from structures that can attach to those clauses and often closely resemble them.[64] These inabilities suggest that students must learn to analyze and recognize sentence structures and learn to use punctuation correctly, so students need a basic grammar vocabulary, such as independent and dependent clause, subordinator, conjunction, and semicolon. Students also need to review coordination and subordination. While all this knowledge can be obtained from grammar handbooks, Irmscher suggests that teaching the grammar of sentence structure be incorporated with teaching punctuation usage.[65] Punctuation should be taught not as rules but as a system "largely determined by syntax."[66] In other words, students should develop

an awareness of the grammatical units that require commas, for instance, rather than learn all the rules for using commas. "Unless the intuitive sense of closure is counterbalanced by syntactic certainty, all kinds of blunders can occur."[67]

Aside from suggesting that students need to learn basic sentence structures and punctuation usage and review the principles of coordination and subordination, the research provides few specific techniques for remediating run-ons and fragments. D'Eloia suggests that students apply a structural analysis to items in a group of semantically related structures to discern which are complete and which are fragments; otherwise, only Shaughnessy suggests an instructional plan for remediating run-ons and fragments.[68] First, she recommends that students learn such basic concepts as subject, verb, and object so their sentences can be discussed, and students should know the names and functions of punctuation marks; then "the study of punctuation ought to be a study of sentence structure, not merely a definition of the marks themselves."[69] Punctuation usage and sentence structure should be taught at the same time because "the process whereby writers mark sentences is related to the process whereby they make them."[70]

After proposing this basic instruction, Shaughnessy makes more directed suggestions for helping students avoid writing run-ons and fragments. First, she claims that students should learn the options for connecting independent clauses: comma +

conjunction, semicolon, and semicolon + conjunctive adverb.[71] She believes that students will need to practice using the latter, however, by supplying the most logical conjunctive adverb between two statements in prepared exercises.[72] Shaughnessy also recommends that students be taught the differences between linking and embedding independent clauses and thereby learn the principles of subordination, too.[73] To learn not to write sentence fragments, students need to practice embedding, by which she says they will notice how embedded units "adhere" to complete sentences and require commas when in sentence initial position.[74] Moreover, Shaughnessy believes that practice with embedding will give students a basic vocabulary of common subordinators, "words that signal embedding," and as such may also signal a fragment if the unit is punctuated as a sentence.[75]

Shaughnessy, therefore, prescribes sentence combining to give students practice producing correct compound and complex sentences. This activity, she claims, allows students to generate both types of sentences while retaining grammatical control and also lets students see how those structures can go wrong and become run-ons and fragments.[76] In addition, sentence combining can "increase syntactic maturity in writers of college age."[77] When used in combination with basic instruction in punctuation and grammar, sentence combining will actually help reduce the number of errors students make,

including run-ons and fragments. This is the conclusion Carol David drew after studying the effectiveness of a program she used with remedial students. They were taught clause analysis, coordination, and subordination, along with punctuation usage; sentence combining exercises complemented the instruction.[78] She found that, after completing the program, students "reduced their errors by more than half."[79] Elaine Maimon and Barbara Nodine reported similar results from a writing program that employed sentence combining. They found that embedding errors, including run-ons and fragments, increased initially, but ultimately T-unit length increased and the number of errors decreased.[80]

A final suggestion for reducing the number of run-ons and fragments in students' writing comes from Donna Gorrell. Called controlled or guided composition, her suggestion is an alternative or precursor to sentence combining. Controlled composition requires students to copy and eventually manipulate prewritten material, asking them to employ the grammatical knowledge they have but do not use.[81] Since these activities demand accurate transcriptions and manipulations, students must attend to the "lexical and syntactic forms in the written language;" eventually students are asked to do "controlled phrase and clause embeddings."[82] Controlled composition activities then provide practice in writing correctly without direct grammar instruction. This activity plus

sentence combining are the most specific exercises the research prescribes to remediate run-on sentences and sentence fragments. Otherwise, the research only specifies the instruction necessary to prevent students from producing those incorrect sentence structures.

CHAPTER II. ANALYSIS OF STUDENTS' RUN-ONS AND FRAGMENTS: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Although not extensive, the research on run-on sentences and sentence fragments gives teachers of composition a better understanding of why those problems occur in students' writing, perhaps suggesting a new perspective for dealing with the errors. Remediation of both sentence structure problems would be more direct if teachers understood the grammatical contexts in which each commonly occurs. This knowledge would allow teachers to narrow their focus and be more precise in their instruction. What, then, are the circumstances and contexts under which students write run-ons and fragments?

Run-on Sentences

According to the research, run-on sentences are of two types: a comma splice or a fused sentence. In both cases, students connect two sentences that they perceive as one rhetorical unit, which indicates that they remember the principle of coordination but use inadequate punctuation. They fail to recognize two independent clauses punctuated as one sentence, and they do not use the correct punctuation mark or a conjunction at the juncture.

From the research, only Kagan's study specifies grammatical contexts for run-on sentences, but do those contexts represent run-on sentences actually written by students? To

find out, this study examined fourteen randomly selected narrative essays written by students in a college freshman composition course. The twenty-one run-on sentences found in them indicate that Kagan's contexts may not be accurate. The fourteen essays examined were the first assigned compositions of a semester course and were completed outside of class. Run-ons were explained in class as an error that would be marked in the compositions, but no instruction was given on coordination and punctuation. In the fourteen compositions examined, twenty-one run-on sentences occur in only seven of the compositions. One composition contains two run-ons, one has three, one has four run-ons, and one composition contains nine. Three compositions contain one run-on each. Eighteen of the run-on sentences are comma splices while only three are fused or run-together sentences, so the concentration on comma splices in the research seems justified.

Contrary to Kagan's study, the majority of student run-ons do not follow the "short sentence + long sentence" pattern; only three sentences do. Nine run-ons are long sentences followed by short sentences, and in the remaining nine run-ons, the sentences are of similar length. Kagan also states that in the items students selected as run-ons, the long sentences generally contained participial phrases, compound verbs, or subordinate clauses. In the run-on sentences

the students in the sample wrote, only one of the long sentences contains a participial phrase, one has a compound verb (another one is also a compound sentence), and four have dependent clauses. In fourteen of the run-ons, both sentences are simple sentences. The results of Kagan's study do not seem to reflect accurately the types of run-on sentences students write. While the twenty-one student-written run-ons are not an adequate sample from which to draw definitive conclusions, they nonetheless raise questions and show the need for more extensive research.

The Harper Handbook of College Composition offers a different list of four grammatical contexts for comma splices which prove more accurate than Kagan's findings. The contexts are as follows: (1) the two joined sentences are related by content but not by syntax; (2) the second sentence begins with a personal pronoun whose antecedent is in the first sentence; (3) the second sentence begins with a demonstrative pronoun or adjective; (4) the second sentence begins with or contains a conjunctive adverb.[83] Half of the student sample run-ons fit two of these categories. Ten of the second sentences begin with personal pronouns whose antecedents are in the first sentences, and in two of those, the second sentences begin with demonstrative pronouns. Table 1 below gives examples of run-ons with grammatical descriptions from Kagan's study, The

Harper Handbook, and the student sample; the similarities and differences among the three sources are apparent.

Table 1. Grammatical descriptions and examples of run-on sentences from the research and from the student sample

grammatical description	example
Kagan	
1. short sentence + long sentence with subordinate clause	"The phone rang he did not hear it because he was in the shower" (p. 134)
2. short sentence + long sentence with compound verb	"It snowed heavily people watched and waited in their cabins" (p. 134)
3. long sentence with participial phrase + short sentence	"Grinning from ear to ear he entered the house they were all waiting" (p. 134)
The Harper Handbook of College Composition, 5th edition	
1. two sentences related by content, not by syntax	"A meeting of the club is scheduled for tonight, many important items are on the agenda." (p. 328)
2. second sentence begins with a personal pronoun with its antecedent in the first sentence	"The ambulance driver examined the victim carefully, he did not say a word." (p. 328)
3. second sentence begins with a demonstrative pronoun or adjective	"Drive carefully when you approach the bridge, this is very narrow." (p. 328)
4. second sentence begins with or contains a conjunctive adverb	"I was late for the lecture, however, Ms. James did not scold me." (p. 329)

Table 1. (continued)

grammatical description	example
Student sample	
1. long sentence + short sentence or sentences of similar length	"Once in awhile I will bring back the wonderful memories and shed a tear over his loss, it was a great one to me."
2. second sentence is a simple sentence	(see example one)
3. subject of second sentence is first word	(see example one)
4. subject of second sentence is personal pronoun that links it rhetorically with first sentence	(see example one)

A more accurate analysis might show more significant results from an examination of the second sentence in a run-on. The structure of that sentence, the position of its subject, and the use of a pronoun for the subject are the most apparent factors in the analysis of the twenty-one student run-ons. Twenty of the second sentences are simple sentences, and in sixteen the first word of the second sentence is the subject. In nineteen of the second sentences, that subject is a pronoun (seventeen are personal pronouns, two are demonstrative pronouns). In six of those nineteen, the pronoun is the same one that stands as subject in the first sentence. In fourteen of those nineteen cases, the pronoun's antecedent is in the first sentence (the antecedent is often, however, another pronoun and not a noun). In the analysis of the students' run-ons, then, five results seem significant: (1) most run-ons are

comma splices; (2) the short sentence usually follows the longer one when they are of different lengths; (3) the second sentence is usually a simple sentence; (4) the subject of the second sentence is often the first word; (5) the subject of the second sentence is usually a pronoun that rhetorically links it with the first sentence. (See Appendix A for the student sample run-ons with grammatical descriptions.)

With run-on sentences, then, students do seem to be punctuating according to rhetorical units. Pronouns are a link to the preceding sentence, so students use a comma instead of a period between the two sentences to recognize the relationship. The sense of juncture is correct, but students do not realize that a comma is inadequate to separate two independent clauses. To proofread for run-ons, students should scan their sentences for commas; if the word following a comma is a personal pronoun or a noun, then they should analyze the structures on each side of the comma to determine if they are independent clauses. Instruction should explain sentence analysis and review the principles of coordination so that students know that they must insert a conjunction after the comma or replace it with a semicolon or period, for students who write run-ons have recognized the correct juncture. Remediating run-on sentences, then, is largely a matter of clause analysis and instruction in punctuation usage.

Sentence Fragments

With sentence fragments, the students' sense of juncture also seems to be accurate, but often punctuation incorrectly separates sentence final dependent clauses from their independent base clauses. The research defines a sentence fragment as a single grammatical sentence incorrectly broken into two sentences by a period. The period separates two rhetorical units: one is an independent clause, the other a dependent grammatical structure that students incorrectly sense is complete by itself. Although students use a period instead of a comma, the complete sentence shows growing syntactic maturity because students are trying to add clauses and phrases per T-unit. They create dependent structures but do not yet attach them to main clauses. Students' intuition for joining (commas) instead of terminating (periods or semicolons) is not quite formed. With fragments, students are applying the principles of subordination and have an accurate sense of juncture. Their failure is in comprehending independent and dependent structures and in using appropriate punctuation.

Several dependent grammatical structures are commonly cited as being fragments in students' compositions. Shaughnessy names two structures: initial adverbial clauses and the second part of compound structures. Kagan, from her test, cites three structures that students selected as sentences:

verb + subordinate clause, verb + direct object + prepositional phrase, and two prepositional phrases. Harris, in an analysis of real student fragments, reports that of those "which got detached from their base clauses by inappropriate insertions of periods," 7% were in sentence initial and 83% in sentence final position.[84] Of the latter, 26% were "primarily subordinate clauses at the ends of the sentences," and 57% were final free modifiers: noun phrases, nominative absolutes, and verb phrases.[85] In 24% of those final free modifier fragments, "some element . . . was compounded."[86]

Analysis of the student sample fragments from the fourteen student compositions supports Shaughnessy's and Harris' findings but not Kagan's. However, only eight sentence fragments were found in five of those fourteen compositions. No instruction had been given on subordination prior to the composition assignment, and fragments were cited as being major errors. Seven of the students' fragments are in sentence final position; four are cut off from the main clause by periods, four by semicolons. All the fragments require commas to attach them to their base clauses. Each fragment contains a dependent clause. The fragment in sentence initial position contains two participial phrases and an adjective clause. One of the sentence final fragments contains the second part of a compound verb preceded by a participle and an adverb clause.

One of the fragments produced by a semicolon contains however as a transition. (See Appendix B for the student sample fragments with grammatical descriptions.)

In support of Harris' findings, four of the fragments that follow the base clause are final free modifiers. None are nominative absolutes, but two are noun phrases and one is a verb phrase. One is the second part of a compound structure, which Shaughnessy also notes as being frequently fragmented. There is also, as Shaughnessy indicates is common, a long introductory clause fragmented, though it is an adjective rather than an adverb clause. To show how the grammatical structures from the research and the student sample compare, Table 2 below provides examples with grammatical descriptions.

Table 2. Grammatical descriptions and examples of sentence fragments from the research and from the student sample

grammatical description	example
Shaughnessy	
1. initial adverbial clause	"'But I think if people could learn to think a little like children. This would be a better place to live.'" (p. 25)
2. second part of a compound structure	"'I agree that the little boy has seen beauty. But is confused with the question.'" (p. 25)
Kagan	
1. verb + subordinate clause	"Shouted loudly because he knew she was deaf" (p. 131)
2. verb + direct object + prepositional phrase	"Placed his hat on the hook" (p. 131)

Table 2. (continued)

grammatical description	example
Kagan (continued)	
3. two prepositional phrases	"In the corner under the table" (p. 131)
Harris	
1. sentence final subordinate clause	"'Playboy has a reputation for getting a sophisticated and elite group of readers. Although this is a value judgment and in some circumstances, not a true premise.'" (p. 180)
2. final free modifier, noun phrase	"'I believe that the author is trying to convey the meaning of life to the reader. A sense of purpose and fulfillment to life.'" (p. 180)
3. final free modifier, nominative absolute	"'The story appealed to your sense of nostalgia and proved a point. The point being that at maturity we have to fit into a style and become responsible.'" (p. 180)
4. final free modifier, verb phrase	"'She opened the door and let us into her home. Not realizing at the time that we would never enter that door in her home again.'" (p. 180)
Student Sample	
1. final free modifier verb phrase (misuse of semicolon)	"In an attempt to break my nervousness, I decided to leave early for school; hoping the fresh air and sunshine would help."
2. sentence initial adjective clause with two participial phrases	"After straightening myself in the mens room, where I received a strange look from a guy seeing me change. I go to class and am about five minutes late."

Table 2. (continued)

grammatical description	example
3. sentence final fragment with second part of compound verb	"Another nurse asked me to lay on a table; positioning me so that I was extremely uncomfortable and told me not to move."
4. however used as a conjunctive adverb	"He was traveling so fast; however, that his car was able to turn our pick-up truck one hundred and eighty degrees around."
5. final free modifier, noun phrase	"My adventure began when Neal, Phil and I set out for our first attempt of this bright and blue day to experience the sport of water skiing. A sport which requires both skill and endurance."
6. final free modifier, verb phrase	"In an attempt to break my nervousness, I decided to leave early for school; hoping the fresh air and sunshine would help.
7. second part of a compound structure	"Once informed, I began first by putting on my life preserver. Then my skiis, which were like being fastened to the floor."

While there are only eight fragments to analyze from the student sample, at least three conclusions seem notable: (1) most fragments occur in sentence final position; (2) they usually contain one dependent clause; (3) the period or semicolon preceding them indicates a correct juncture that needs to be filled by a comma. This final conclusion again indicates that students do not understand punctuation usage. Because four of the fragments were created by semicolons, students specifically need to learn when to use that mark. They discern a juncture between the independent and dependent clauses and may

recognize that a period is not warranted, yet students want a mark stronger than a comma. For this reason, perhaps they use a semicolon. So while technically the semicolons are creating fragments, these seem like errors of punctuation rather than sentence structure errors.

Learning the correct use of semicolons, however, requires clause analysis, which is also necessary if students are to learn the principles of subordination so that they will join dependent clauses to base clauses instead of punctuating them as sentences. Because subordination is a skill students begin to acquire at an age later than that at which coordination is mastered, the principle needs to be reviewed thoroughly because students are still learning to subordinate different types of dependent structures, such as -ing structures.

Analysis of Findings and Suggestions for Remediation

Of the seven students who wrote run-ons in the sample, only two also wrote sentence fragments; the student who wrote nine run-ons wrote no fragments. This student may have had deficient syntactic skills and may not have mastered the punctuation used with coordination nor have learned how to use subordination at all. Perhaps some of the run-on sentences from the sample actually indicate an attempt to subordinate. That is, when the second sentence of a run-on is

short and has a personal pronoun in initial position as the subject, the writer may have meant to subordinate it to the preceding sentence to which it is closely related. For example, instead of writing, "I thought we had it made she just stood there shaking," the student may have intended to say "because she just stood there shaking." The student who wrote this run-on produced no fragments in his composition, so perhaps he was trying to use subordination.

Regardless, using the wrong punctuation marks causes fragments as well as run-ons. This tendency suggests that students need to learn when to use periods, semicolons, and commas, and for that students must be able to identify independent and dependent clauses in sentences. This line of instruction leads to a review of the principles of coordination and subordination. Remediation of both sentence structure errors therefore begins at the same point--clause analysis and punctuation usage--and requires students to learn several basic grammatical terms: subject, verb, clause, independent clause, dependent clause, conjunction, subordinator, coordination, subordination, comma, semicolon, period. Conjunctive adverb and subordinator may be avoided as terms if the most common of each are simply listed on a sheet of punctuation patterns for reference.

After learning the necessary terms and the usages of

punctuation marks and reviewing the principles of coordination and subordination, students should examine correctly written compound and complex sentences and then produce their own in sentence combining exercises. When they have correctly produced compound and complex sentences in guided activities, they should write a paragraph or essay in which they consciously produce both types of sentences.

At this point, instructors can introduce proofreading techniques. The grammatical pattern that emerged from the analysis of students' run-ons suggests that students should scan their sentences for commas; if the word following the comma is a pronoun, they should apply clause analysis to the group of words following and preceding the comma to determine if the sentence is a comma splice. According to the analysis of the fragments in the sample, to check for sentence fragments, students should analyze the word groups that follow semicolons to be sure that they are independent clauses. Then, reading backwards, since most fragments are final free modifiers, students should analyze structures that begin with subordinators, relative pronouns, or participles (-ing words). Students should also read aloud when they proofread to develop a sense of sentence completeness.

After locating run-ons and fragments in their writing, students should correct them by applying what they have

learned about punctuation, coordination, and subordination. Students should realize, though, that the means by which they correct their errors is a rhetorical choice. Students have at least three options for correcting a run-on sentence: between the two independent clauses, insert (1) a comma + conjunction, (2) a semicolon, or (3) a period to create two separate sentences. However, students may also choose to subordinate the second independent clause and attach it to the first one, perhaps with a comma. To correct a sentence fragment, the most obvious means is to change the semicolon or period to a comma to connect what is usually a sentence final dependent clause to its preceding base clause. But again the method used is a rhetorical choice, and students may also add the missing grammatical elements to make the fragment a complete sentence. Generally, however, a fragment can be attached to an adjoining independent clause.

By following these procedures, students should be able to produce compound and complex sentences and identify and correct their faulty counterparts as well. Students need to learn sentence analysis to identify independent and dependent clauses. Then they need to be aware of the principles of coordination and subordination so they can recognize when a clause should be linked or attached. Also, students need to know the names and functions of the punctuation marks

necessary for correct coordination and subordination. The instruction should enable students to proofread for run-ons and fragments in their own writing as well, for they must finally be able to write correct sentence structures of their own and proofread for errors in those structures in their compositions. Therefore, the most valuable learning practice may be having students write, proofread, and correct.

CHAPTER III. ANALYSIS OF HANDBOOKS' TREATMENT OF RUN-ONS AND FRAGMENTS

Based on the research and the student sample, effective remediation of run-ons and fragments should begin with lessons on basic sentence structures. Students need to be able to identify dependent and independent clauses in sentences before they can understand the principles of coordination and subordination, which should be explained next. Accompanying this instruction should be lessons on the correct uses of punctuation marks. Then students should not only be able to produce correct compound and complex sentences, but they should also be able to analyze their sentences to find and correct run-ons and fragments.

Do grammar handbooks follow this sequence of instruction for remediating run-on sentences and sentence fragments? The following ten handbooks used by instructors of college freshman composition courses were examined to answer that question: The Little English Handbook: Choices and Conventions; Handbook of Current English, 6th edition; The Random House Handbook, 3rd edition; The Heath Handbook of Composition, 10th edition; The Little, Brown Handbook; Writing--A College Handbook; Harbrace College Handbook, 9th edition; The Harper Handbook of College Composition, 5th edition; Writing Skills Handbook; The Macmillan Handbook of English, 7th edition. Three points of

comparison were drawn from the texts' sections on run-ons and fragments: (1) definitions of the errors, (2) rules and explanations for preventing and correcting them, (3) exercises prescribed for learning to correct the errors. The texts' treatment of run-ons will be examined first, followed by a review of their coverage of fragments. After that, the handbooks' effectiveness in dealing with run-ons and fragments can be evaluated.

Run-on Sentences

The texts, like the research, generally categorize run-on sentences as one of two types: comma splices or fused sentences. A comma splice, sometimes referred to as a comma fault, occurs when two independent clauses are joined by only a comma. A fused sentence consists of two independent clauses run together without a conjunction or punctuation. The definitions of each type of run-on sentence are fairly consistent in the handbooks, and, with one exception, the texts cover run-ons in sections within chapters that deal with errors that occur in compositions.

Only The Random House Handbook deals with run-ons solely in the glossary. While the other handbooks with glossaries define them there, too, they deal with them in more detail in other sections. After defining comma splices and fused sentences, the texts usually list rules by which run-ons may

be avoided. Generally, they tell students not to join two main clauses with a comma unless the comma is followed by a coordinating conjunction. To avoid fused sentences, students are told not to run two sentences together without an appropriate connecting word and/or the proper punctuation. Whether or not the handbooks include such dictums, however, they all explain methods by which run-ons may be corrected, usually in context with examples that show how those methods are applied. For instance, Writing--A College Handbook recommends as one alternative, "put a conjunction after the comma," and immediately gives an example: "She wore huge dark glasses, so no one recognized her."[87] In showing corrections for fused sentences, the handbooks either refer students to the same methods used to correct comma splices or list them again. Most texts also caution students that the manner in which they correct run-ons is a rhetorical choice, and to that end, one example of a comma splice is sometimes corrected by more than one method to show the differences.

A few texts list three ways to correct comma splices, but most give four. The Heath Handbook explains six methods for correcting comma splices, giving, as most of the other handbooks do, accompanying examples for each. One of the common methods, included in The Heath Handbook, suggests coordinating the clauses with a conjunction. The Heath Handbook's example

shows how this method works: the comma splice, "We will add another room to the house this summer, painting will have to wait until next year." is then revised as "We will . . . this summer, but painting . . . year."[88] No more explanation is given, although some texts refer students to other sections for more complete explanations, such as the section on conjunctions. The other three commonly listed methods for correcting comma splices are joining the independent clauses with a semicolon, separating them into two sentences with a period, or subordinating one of the clauses. One of The Heath Handbook's additional methods is to use a semicolon or a period plus a conjunctive adverb between the two sentences. The other method explains that commas adequately join sentences when they are "short, closely related independent clauses in a series," such as "The wind blew, the shutters banged, the children trembled."[89]

While this last method admits instances when comma splices are acceptable, most of the handbooks do not include it. Only three others refer to a similar rhetorical use of comma splices, so generally the handbooks regard run-on sentences as errors to be corrected by one of four or five valid means. The explanations of those corrective measures, however, are often unsatisfactory. Other than stating the method and giving an example, explanation is often not provided, as has

been illustrated by The Heath Handbook and Writing--A College Handbook. Furthermore, any grammatical terms used in the explanations are often defined only in other parts of the handbooks to which students are referred. While writing compositions, if students refer to a section on comma splices, the information they need should be there, stated simply.

In its chapter on run-on sentences, the Harbrace College Handbook not only uses grammatical terminology but refers to complex syntactic contexts when describing comma splices. For example, it explains that since conjunctive adverbs are not coordinating conjunctions and can change position in the second independent clause, a semicolon must be used between two sentences joined by a conjunctive adverb.[90] This explanation seems to provide more technical information about conjunctive adverbs than most students need for correcting run-on sentences. A handbook such as Writing Skills Handbook that suggests adding a "linking" or "joining word" to a comma splice seems more suited to students with limited grammatical knowledge. If students knew as much as Harbrace College Handbook requires, they probably would not be writing run-on sentences.

Another shortcoming of the handbooks is the absence of clear, explicit proofreading procedures for locating run-ons in a composition. A few of the texts advise students to read

their sentences aloud because different breath pauses indicate various marks of punctuation; this is a suggestion in The Heath Handbook. While this technique may be valid, it is not enough. Students also need to be able to analyze sentence structures to determine if two independent clauses are written as one sentence; some of the texts, such as Little, Brown Handbook and Handbook of Current English, express this necessity. The Harper Handbook goes one step further and explains four grammatical contexts in which comma splices occur which match the findings from the analysis of the student sample. If students can analyze clause structures and recognize common grammatical structures for comma splices, they should be able to find run-ons in their compositions. But while some texts suggest valid proofreading techniques, they fail to emphasize proofreading equally with the methods to correct run-ons. And students cannot correct run-ons unless they can find them.

The exercises most textbooks provide on run-on sentences assume that students can recognize them even though some texts seldom explain just how that identification can be done. Three texts have no exercises on run-ons, but in the others, the activities are generally of the same type: identify and correct the run-ons in lists of sentences or in paragraphs. The handbooks therefore assume that, after reading their sections on run-ons, students will be able to recognize and

correct those sentence errors, at least in prepared exercises if not in their own compositions. The texts do explain valid, though often grammatically complicated, methods for correcting run-ons, but they do not consider the principles of coordination nor the grammatical requirements for punctuation that run-on sentences violate. Without clear instruction on coordination and the punctuation it requires, carry-over into students' own writing of what the texts teach may be limited.

Sentence Fragments

Similar shortcomings characterize the handbooks' treatment of sentence fragments. In explaining them, the texts use even more technical grammatical terminology. Following the same pattern of presentation used with run-ons, the texts define fragments, explain and give examples for correcting them, and prescribe exercises on identifying and correcting fragments. However, in the case of sentence fragments, the handbooks more often name the numerous grammatical structures that become fragments and spend more time discussing permissible uses of fragments. Overall, the handbooks' coverage of sentence fragments is lengthier and uses more grammatical terms in explanations but indicates more directly how students might proofread for fragments in their compositions.

The definitions of sentence fragments are of three types. Some handbooks provide lengthy, complex definitions that include grammatical terminology, such as this one from The Little English Handbook:

> a string of words, between an initial capital letter and a period or a question mark, that lacks a subject or a finite-verb predicate (or both) or that has a subject and a finite-verb predicate but is made part of a larger structure by a relative pronoun . . . or by a subordinating conjunction.[91]

Most students would require subsequent definitions of finite-verb predicate, relative pronoun, and subordinating conjunctions, but even then this definition of fragments, with its complexity, would probably not be clear. What is meant by, "made part of a larger structure," for instance? At the other extreme, other texts' definitions are simple but adequate; Writing--A College Handbook defines a fragment as "a part of a sentence punctuated as if it were a whole one."[92] The third type of definition, though also simple, contains one or two grammatical terms that can easily be explained. For example, here is the Harbrace College Handbook's definition: "A fragment is a nonsentence. It is a part of a sentence--such as a phrase or subordinate clause--written as if it were a

sentence."[93] From this definition, phrase and subordinate clause would have to be defined, but the fact that a fragment is "a part of a sentence" is clear.

That there are various definitions for sentence fragments may indicate disagreement on how thoroughly handbooks should deal with fragments. A variety of grammatical structures become sentence fragments, but how much detail is necessary to explain fragments to students? Presumably the texts discuss specific fragmented grammatical structures as a proofreading aid so that students can recognize the structures in their writing. There are other, more direct suggestions for proofreading, too. For instance, the Harbrace College Handbook suggests that fragments can also be recognized by reading aloud and noticing voice intonation as an indicator of termination or incompletion; however, it plainly says that being able to recognize the structural differences between complete sentences and dependent structures is the better way to proofread for fragments.[94] The texts generally agree on this last point, but most of the texts also list and give examples of numerous grammatical structures that can frequently become fragments.

If these lists are intended to help students identify fragments, then lengthy explanations of the structures would be included for each item. But in most cases, students must

refer to other sections of the handbooks for explanations. The grammatical structures listed in The Heath Handbook as common types of fragments are appositive phrases, prepositional phrases, participial phrases, infinitive phrases, and dependent clauses.[95] The Little, Brown Handbook and The Heath Handbook are two other texts that have similar lists of syntactic structures as fragments; usually the structure is only named and illustrated, with no additional explanation, as in The Heath Handbook: appositive phrase--"The crowd that attended the local track meet was the usual one. Parents, friends of the athletes, and people looking for a good tan."[96] If most fragments are sentence final structures or subordinate clauses, as the research contends, then it does not seem necessary to use so much grammatical detail to explain fragments, especially when students must refer to other sections of the text to discover, for instance, what an appositive is.

Fortunately the texts' suggestions for correcting fragments are simpler and consistent. As they did for run-ons, the handbooks present remediation procedures with rules that are explained, generally, by examples. Handbook of Current English explains that a fragment is often part of a preceding sentence, which may be evident if both structures are read aloud; if the second structure is a fragment, it should be joined to the preceding sentence with a comma: "The next

afternoon we made our way through the harbor of Okinawa. That island, which had made history during World War II." becomes "The next afternoon we made our way . . . Okinawa, the island which had . . . during World War II."[97] Usually the texts suggest two ways to correct a fragment: (1) attach it to an adjacent sentence from which it has been cut off, as in the preceding example, or (2) add the sentence part--subject or predicate--that is missing. Some texts, like Handbook of Current English, suggest a third alternative: totally rewrite the fragment as one or more sentences when it is "involved or hopelessly snarled."[98] Whatever type of grammatical structure the fragment is, the texts consistently recommend those three methods for correcting fragments, although the texts generally fail to note that the method used is a rhetorical choice.

If handbooks can explain basic sentence structures, clarify subordination and the uses of punctuation, and provide practice for identifying correctly punctuated complex sentences, students should be able to recognize and correct fragments in their writing. Most of the texts provide exercises to give students practice; usually of the same type used with run-on sentences, the exercises ask students to identify and correct the fragments in lists of sentence structures and in paragraphs. More complicated exercises provide fragments, ask students to name their grammatical structures, and then

rewrite the fragments as complete sentences. Other exercises, which may confuse students, ask them to differentiate, in a list of fragments, between those that are acceptable and those that are errors. Most of the handbooks discuss permissible sentence fragments. Generally, however, the texts caution students that fragments are unacceptable in expository writing, since fragments' main use is in narrative and descriptive essays. Besides, the texts imply that students should consistently demonstrate an ability to write complete sentences before trying to use fragments effectively in rhetorically appropriate contexts, such as dialogue.

Summary and Analysis

Overall, the handbooks' treatment of sentence fragments is more extensive and grammatically involved than it is for run-on sentences. The texts' discussions of both errors, though, omit material that the research and student samples indicate is necessary for successful remediation. The texts, in their sections on run-ons and fragments, fail to consider them as punctuation errors or as grammatical problems of coordination and subordination. Other sections of the texts that might refer to run-ons and fragments generally do not. In only five handbooks is there direct mention of run-ons and/or fragments in the chapters on punctuation; fragments

are referred to in the sections on periods, run-ons in the sections on commas (The Little English Handbook, The Random House Handbook, The Harper Handbook, Writing--A College Handbook, Handbook of Current English). Only twice is there mention of fragments in the sections on semicolons (The Little English Handbook, The Random House Handbook). Furthermore, the exercises in the texts ask students to identify and correct the run-ons and fragments in a paragraph or list of sentence structures by using proofreading skills that have not been provided.

The sections that deal with run-on sentences and sentence fragments frequently refer students to various other sections of the texts, such as those on the correct use of the period. Furthermore, the sections on run-ons and fragments are consistently isolated from the texts' discussions of coordination and subordination. The Little English Handbook lists no sections on either subordination or coordination in its table of contents, and The Random House Handbook, Handbook of Current English, The Macmillan Handbook, and Harbrace College Handbook have no sections on coordination. The remaining five texts--The Harper Handbook; Writing Skills Handbook; Little, Brown Handbook; The Heath Handbook; and Writing--A College Handbook--contain sections on both coordination and subordination. Only in Writing--A College Handbook is there mention

of run-on sentences in the chapter on coordination; the chapter on subordination does not include a section on fragments, however.

These omissions reveal serious inconsistencies with the research and the analysis of the student samples, which indicate that run-ons and fragments occur when students misunderstand coordination and subordination and are ignorant of the punctuation marks necessary to employ those principles successfully. The handbooks need several adjustments to help students remediate run-ons and fragments. In their sections on each error, the texts need to explain clause analysis so that by identifying subjects and verbs, students can recognize independent and dependent sentence structures. Complementary to that instruction would be an explanation of the correct usage of periods, commas, and semicolons with coordination and subordination. After receiving this instruction, students should be able to write and recognize correct compound and complex sentences. Then, the handbooks should explain common grammatical patterns that occur in run-ons and fragments as proofreading tips and list, as rhetorical choices, methods by which each error can be corrected. To be as brief and concise as possible, the handbooks should omit most of the grammatical terminology and concentrate chiefly on those syntactic structures which are run together and fragmented in students' actual compositions.

CHAPTER IV. SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

Summary of Research Problem, Method, and Findings

Composition instructors generally consider run-on sentences and sentence fragments as errors and usually rely on grammar handbooks for remediation. According to the research on each incorrect sentence structure and an analysis of actual student run-ons and fragments, do the textbooks effectively deal with them? Does the research reflect the grammatical structures of students' errors, and does it therefore aptly explain them and suggest adequate remediation? To answer those questions, first the research was reviewed. Next, student samples of run-ons and fragments were gathered from compositions students wrote in a college freshman composition course. These samples were analyzed to determine if the research reflected student errors accurately. Finally, grammar handbooks' coverage of run-ons and fragments was examined to judge whether it deals with each problem as the research and the samples would recommend.

The research on each emphasizes that students with incomplete knowledge of sentence structures and punctuation will mark sentences according to rhetorical, not grammatical, units. Since most of the run-ons in the student sample were comma splices, run-ons especially seem to be errors of punctuation.

That assessment, though, also indicates a failure to recognize grammatically independent sentence structures but not a failure to coordinate them. However, as run-ons were cited as predictors of early syntactic growth, their appearance in college compositions could indicate a student who has not mastered the principles of coordination. Subordination, on the other hand, is a skill students acquire at a later age and continue to develop as they reach college age, so sentence fragments are faulty subordination but are also evidence of syntactic growth. Judging from the research and student sample, though, fragments also reveal difficulty in recognizing grammatically complete sentence structures and in using appropriate punctuation to join dependent to independent grammatical structures.

Run-ons and fragments also occur in particular grammatical contexts, according to the research and the analysis of the student samples. Only one study specified common structures for run-ons, whereas several named grammatical contexts for fragments. Also, in most cases fragments were said to occur in sentence final position. Generally, the research on fragments was more extensive and detailed. For each, though, the research was careful to point out rhetorical situations in which the use of run-ons and fragments is permissible. For neither, unfortunately, was there much mention of

instructional or remedial plans to teach students to write correct, complete sentence structures and to proofread for and correct run-ons and fragments. When suggestions were given, they emphasized teaching basic sentence structures, punctuation usage, and methods of coordination and subordination concurrently.

Analysis of the student samples indicated that this approach to instruction would be successful. Generally, the run-ons and fragments were errors of punctuation; most run-ons were comma splices, and the fragments occurred from incorrect use of periods and semicolons. However, the analysis of the students' run-ons revealed patterns not supported by the research's suggested common grammatical contexts. Analysis of the students' fragments, on the other hand, showed that the grammatical patterns described in the research were accurate, as most students' errors were sentence final dependent structures. Most importantly, though, the student run-ons and fragments seemed to occur from the causes the research described and indicate that the research's recommendations for instruction would be successful.

The handbooks' treatment of run-ons and fragments usually did not reflect the research. Each error was treated in sections separate from those on sentence analysis, punctuation, coordination, and subordination. Generally, the texts

followed the same format in dealing with both: the errors were defined, rules stated how students should avoid writing run-ons and fragments, and examples showed how methods to correct the errors worked. The coverage of run-ons and fragments was often overloaded with grammatical terminology, especially in the case of fragments, which were treated more extensively with complicated lists of the grammatical structures that become fragments. Furthermore, the handbooks made frequent mention of permissible uses of fragments while they seldom mentioned permissible contexts for run-ons.

Conclusions and Implications

The grammar handbooks' sections on run-ons and fragments do not appear to deal with either effectively, according to the research and the analysis of the student samples. While the texts offer acceptable explanations of how to correct run-ons and fragments, they fail to explain why the errors occur or how to proofread for them in compositions. In addition, the texts need to incorporate instruction on clause analysis and punctuation into their sections on run-ons and fragments. Those sections might also serve the students better if they were included with the chapters on coordination and subordination. Also, sentence combining may be a more effective activity than the handbooks' identify-and-correct exercises for helping students learn to deal with run-ons and

fragments. Since the research indicates that sentence combining clarifies both linking and embedding processes and signals appropriate uses of punctuation, it may lessen the likelihood of run-ons and fragments occurring.

The quantity of research on both errors is not extensive enough to allow conclusive statements about the nature or causes of either run-ons or fragments, even though there is more material on sentence fragments than on run-ons. There is especially a need for a closer examination of the grammatical composition of run-on sentences, which in some cases may indicate that run-ons are actually signs of incorrect subordination rather than faulty coordination. If the research is correct, college-age students should still be acquiring the ability to subordinate dependent clauses. Three observations seem to point to the possibility that some run-ons are actually incomplete subordinate structures: (1) there are more run-ons than fragments in the student samples from college compositions; (2) the second independent clause of the students' run-ons in the sample can often become a dependent clause easily; (3) college students continue to subordinate progressively more complicated grammatical structures, according to the research. Furthermore, students following the sequence of learning described by the research have mastered coordination by college age while they are still

developing their abilities to subordinate dependent grammatical structures. College students, then, should not produce run-on sentences, but since they do, perhaps some of their run-ons are attempts to develop abilities to subordinate.

Further studies on run-ons and fragments need to investigate what coordination and subordination abilities college students possess and what grammatical knowledge they lack in order to prescribe accurate and effective remediation procedures for run-ons and fragments. The research indicates that college students have learned coordination and are able to use subordination, so run-ons and fragments would not seem to be errors in applying either principle. The research and samples suggest that each error occurs because students have no awareness of complete and incomplete grammatical structures to direct their usage of punctuation, but apparently students also do not know the grammatical situations that require commas, semicolons, or periods. Additional studies on run-ons and fragments would enable composition teachers to provide students with more helpful instruction.

Studies that would further focus those remedial techniques need to examine thoroughly the grammatical contexts of students' run-ons and fragments. Exposing the structural patterns of each should reveal deficiencies in students' knowledge of grammar. In this paper, the analysis of student

errors showed that students' use of semicolons caused fragments, so instruction on the correct uses of that punctuation mark is evidently necessary. Specifying the common grammatical patterns of run-ons and fragments should additionally provide proofreading techniques, a matter that was seldom mentioned in the research. This paper's analysis of student samples suggests that students might look for commas followed by pronouns when searching for run-ons, and for semicolons when searching for fragments. A more extensive and scientific analysis of students' run-ons and fragments seems essential.

The findings of such an analysis would then need to be incorporated into the handbooks' treatment of run-ons and fragments. Currently, as this paper points out, the handbooks' sections on run-ons and fragments do not accurately reflect the present research on each or what may be the common grammatical patterns of students' errors. The handbooks fail to explain either as errors in sentence structure or punctuation; neither do the texts present run-ons and fragments in connection with coordination and subordination. While the texts do explain valid techniques for correcting the errors, they do not present common grammatical contexts for the errors' occurrences as proofreading helps. In fact, proofreading for either error is largely ignored by the texts, and students must know how to find the errors in their compositions if

they are to correct them. The handbooks' remediation of run-ons and fragments needs revision, then, for instructors and students often depend entirely on handbooks to tell them how to correct the errors. While instructors and students may sense the inadequacy of the current texts' approaches, they generally have no other references. Consequently, neither instructors nor students learn how to understand the errors or recognize them in compositions, and both those abilities are essential if students are to learn not to write run-on sentences and sentence fragments.

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APPENDIX A. RUN-ON SENTENCES: STUDENT SAMPLE WITH GRAMMATICAL DESCRIPTIONS

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short sentence + long sentence

1. We decided Deb would ride first, he didn't like the idea but he was out-voted two to one.

   comma splice — 1st sentence: complex, noun clause

   2nd sentence: compound, subject is personal pronoun, head of clause, antecedent in first sentence

2. I lay in bed for awhile, then my mom came in to wake up my younger brother and myself.

   comma splice — 1st sentence: simple

   2nd sentence: simple, begins with conjunctive adverb

3. The basement floor of Macy's is extraordinary, called the Cellar it contains a restaurant, bakery, candy store, and delicatessen.

   comma splice — 1st sentence: simple

   2nd sentence: simple, subject is personal pronoun, antecedent in first sentence, participial phrase begins the clause

long sentence + short sentence

4. I would work the horses from the ground for the first two or three weeks, this was to gentle them down some.

   comma splice — 1st sentence: simple

   2nd sentence: simple, subject is demonstrative pronoun, head of clause, antecedent in first clause

5. Then Jim would work the horse to try to teach him some manners, this was all until the Loco Mare.

   comma splice — 1st sentence: simple

   2nd sentence: simple, subject is demonstrative pronoun, head of clause, antecedent in first clause

6. Once in awhile I will bring back the wonderful memories and shed a tear over his loss, it was a great one to me.

   comma splice — 1st sentence: simple, compound verb

   2nd sentence: simple, subject is personal pronoun, head of clause, antecedent in first clause

7. It seemed to [sic] good to be true, it was.

   comma splice — 1st sentence: simple

   2nd sentence: simple, subject is personal pronoun, head of clause, antecedent in first clause (same pronoun)

8. She acted perfect in the ring, no baulking or fussing she didn't even seem nervous.

   run together — 1st sentence: simple

   2nd sentence: simple, subject is personal pronoun, head of clause, antecedent in first clause (same pronoun)

9. I had to help pick them up for the guy as fast as I could, but to no avail I was still late for my class.

   run together — 1st sentence: complex, adverb clause

   2nd sentence: simple, subject is personal pronoun, head of clause, antecedent in first clause (same pronoun)

10. When I hit the ground she decided not to turn and run, she was ready for a fight.

    comma splice — 1st sentence: complex, adverb clause

    2nd sentence: simple, subject is personal pronoun, head of clause, antecedent in first clause (same pronoun)

11. As I walked down the hall and saw the others stiffly move from place to place all I could feel was a little bit happy, after all, we won.

    comma splice — 1st sentence: complex, adverb clause, adjective clause

    2nd sentence: simple, subject is personal pronoun

12. She was still there in the morning, which cost me five dollars, I'd bet against the stall.

    comma splice — 1st sentence: complex, adjective clause

2nd sentence: simple, subject is personal pronoun, head of clause, antecedent in first clause (pronoun me)

sentences of similar length

13. That exam earned me more than just an "A" for the course, it taught me to respect and have confidence in my ability.

comma splice 1st sentence: simple

2nd sentence: simple, subject is personal pronoun, head of clause, antecedent in first clause

14. I looked up in time to see a yellow blur moving quickly towards me, I barely had time to hit the brakes and stop my car.

comma splice 1st sentence: simple

2nd sentence: simple, subject is personal pronoun, head of clause, antecedent in first clause (same pronoun)

15. My chance finally came to me, we moved out of town.

comma splice 1st sentence: simple

2nd sentence: simple, subject is personal pronoun, head of clause

16. We kept most of the horses at my place, I had the nicest barn, and a bigger refrigerator.

comma splice 1st sentence: simple

2nd sentence: simple, subject is personal pronoun, head of clause

17. You're to [sic] young, we live in town.

comma splice 1st sentence: simple

2nd sentence: simple, subject is personal pronoun, head of clause

18. But they put us to bed for our afternoon nap, then we heard them pull out of the drive.

comma splice 1st sentence: simple

2nd sentence: simple, subject is personal pronoun, antecedent in first clause (pronoun us), conjunctive adverb is head of clause

19. God, was I ever happy, my dream had finally come true.

comma splice 1st sentence: simple

2nd sentence: simple

20. I wish he were here now, I loved him then and now.

comma splice 1st sentence: complex, noun clause

2nd sentence: simple, subject is personal pronoun, head of clause, antecedent in first clause (same pronoun)

21. I thought we had it made she just stood there shaking.

run together 1st sentence: complex, noun clause

2nd sentence: simple, subject is personal pronoun, head of clause

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Summary of grammatical description of student sample run-on sentences

first sentence		second sentence	
long:	9	long:	3
short:	3	short:	9
same:	9	same:	9
simple:	14	simple:	20
compound:	0	compound:	1
complex:	7	complex:	0
		subject:	
		personal pronoun:	17
		demonstrative pronoun:	2
		antecedent in 1st sentence:	14
		subject head of clause:	16
		conjunctive adverb head of clause:	2

APPENDIX B. SENTENCE FRAGMENTS: STUDENT SAMPLE WITH GRAMMATICAL DESCRIPTIONS

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semicolon used incorrectly

1. Another nurse asked me to lay on a table; positioning me so that I was extremely uncomfortable and told me not to move.

   verbal phrase (second half of compound verb preceded by participle + adverb clause)

2. He was traveling so fast; however, that his car was able to turn our pick-up truck one hundred and eighty degrees around.

   adverb clause, however incorrectly used with semicolon as conjunctive adverb

3. In an attempt to break my nervousness, I decided to leave early for school; hoping the fresh air and sunshine would help.

   final free modifier: verb phrase (participle + noun clause)

4. I wasn't too sure about which was worse; the concussion or all the radiation I was absorbing.

   final free modifier: noun phrase with compound nouns + adjective clause

period used incorrectly

5. My adventure began when Neal, Phil and I set out for our first attempt of this bright and blue day to experience the sport of water skiing. A sport which requires both skill and endurance.

   final free modifier: noun phrase (noun + adjective clause)

6. The trick is to keep the skiis pointed straight in front of me and the rope between the skiis. Neither of which is an easy task.

   final free modifier: pronoun + adjective clause

7. Once informed, I began first by putting on my life preserver. Then my skiis, which were like being fastened to the floor.

   second part of compound structure (noun + adjective clause)

8. After straightening myself in the mens [sic] room, where I received a strange look from a guy seeing me change. I go to class and am about five minutes late.

   sentence initial verbal phrase (participial) + adjective clause

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